

City council declares 'climate emergency'; Institutions commit to working toward carbon neutral status

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Body

Developers, hospitals and universities are pledging to work with the City of Toronto to fight climate change by reducing their energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

Mayor John Tory unveiled his "Green Ways Initiative" Wednesday shortly before city council unanimously declared a "climate emergency" in Toronto, committing to aggressive new targets to reach carbon neutral status, where emission reductions and offsets equal or exceed production.

The mayor said landlords who have so far joined his initiative include the University of Toronto and developer Cadillac Fairview and control a total of 300 million square feet of space. They will commit to not-yet-set targets for energy use reductions that will vary depending on the type of property, and be updated every five years starting with 2025.

Each landlord will benchmark their current greenhouse gas emissions and then devise plans to reduce them, largely through retrofits to make buildings more energy efficient, Tory said, noting participants will save money in energy costs. The city could fund incentives, but the provincial and federal governments also must step up to help, he added.

Other participants include Oxford Properties, Ryerson University, Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, Toronto Community Housing and the University Health Network.

City council voted 25-0 to declare a climate emergency, making official the city's determination to combat global warming.

Councillor Mike Layton said the world's youths are demanding their governments do "more, faster" to combat global warming attributed by the vast majority of scientists to man-made pollution. If Torontonians don't collectively take action now, in the future they'll suffer more than the current inconveniences linked to a changing climate, such as more flooded basements and shrinking beaches, he warned.

"If we don't do more faster, this is going to go beyond mere inconvenience to a catastrophe all around the world," said Layton (Ward 11 University-Rosedale), who before going into politics worked for Environmental Defence advocacy group.

The climate emergency declaration accelerates the city's previous target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions to 80 per cent below 1990 city levels by 2050. In July, city staff said Toronto was ahead of its then-target, with greenhouse gas emissions reduced to 44 per cent of 1990 levels.

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Now, the city is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2050, and next year hearing recommendations from city staff for accelerating that deadline by a decade, to 2040.

Layton admitted the city's new climate commitments, written with input from local environmental advocates, are "vague," but said that's inevitable before city council makes decisions on funding levels and the source of money for initiatives.

The federal Liberal government, now fighting for re-election, in April unveiled a national \$4-billion social-housing fund, including \$1.3 billion for Toronto Community Housing repairs. The Ontario government in past years has also committed millions to making TCH buildings more energy efficient.

According to a 2017 city study, just over half of greenhouse gas emissions in Toronto come from homes and other buildings, primarily from natural gas burned to heat indoor spaces and water. Another 38 per cent comes from transportation sources, mostly private vehicles.

In a statement, Greenpeace Canada said Toronto now needs to use "every tool" at its disposal to build a green economy, including "making big polluters pay their fair share for a real climate emergency response."

Elliott Cappel, who until June was the city's "chief resilience officer" tasked with helping protect Toronto from climate-change impacts, told the Star Wednesday that council has come a long way since 2017 when it adopted its "TransformTO" climate action plan and a resilience strategy.

But Toronto trails cities including Montreal and Amsterdam in taking concrete steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, he said.

"If council is serious about applying a climate lens to city investments, that would imply major changes to (transportation) investments like the Gardiner Expressway, and significant increases for building retrofits, parks and public transit," he said.

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